DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 302 797 CG 021 388

AUTHOR O'Hara, Bruce
TITLE Dead Heros: Surviving the Male Myth.
PUB DATE Jan 88
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Consultation on Vocational Counselling (14th, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, January 26-28, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Emotional Development; *Emotional Response; Foreign Countries; Interpersonal Competence; *Males; *Mythology; Role Perception; Sex Role
IDENTIFIERS Canada; *Heroes

ABSTRACT

North American men die about 10 years younger than their female counterparts. This difference is not based on biological differences but on behavioral differences. Men are taught not to take care of themselves and to deaden themselves emotionally. Men are incurable romantics. They are addicted to the hero myth which is a wonderful inspiring, uplifting fantasy. Heroes can't die if they are pure of heart, are tough, ignore limits, and struggle without recognition for a long time until they find the holy grail. One part of the hero myth that deserves particular attention is the idea that heroes are supposed to be tough, ignore fatigue, grit their teeth against the pain, steel themselves against cowardice, and rise above despair and doubt. Real men are supposed to suppress negative emotions through sheer force of will. This suppression of feelings leads to loss of inner wisdom, connectedness, and self-protection warnings; use of alcohol, nicotine, and over-eating; and suppression of positive feelings. Men can consciously break free by following these 10 steps: (1) not following the crowd; (2) letting go of being a hero; (3) getting physical exercise; (4) working less; (5) living more with less; (6) seeking balance; (7) creating safe spaces; (8) tracking blocking of feelings; (9) nurturing others and themselves; and (10) valuing resilience over toughness. (ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED302797

DEAD HEROS: SURVIVING THE MALE MYTH

Bruce O'Hara, Work Well
521 - 620 View Street, Victoria, B.C. V8W 1J6

A. Men and Mortality

North American men, on average, die about 10 years younger than their female counterparts. That's not news - it's common knowledge. What isn't such common knowledge is that gap is not based on biological differences. Prior to about the year 1800 the gap in life expectancy between men and women was very small. In a good many cultures in the world, men live as long as women do.

Men in North America die young, not from their biology, but from their behaviour. Further evidence of this fact is that as women's lib leads more women to become workaholics, women are starting to succumb to what used to be male diseases: heart attacks, strokes, and ulcers. Now that's equality!

My basic concern is not about physical death. If I die young, I won't be here so it won't be a problem for me. My concern is that as men we're taught not to care for themselves. We're taught to deaden ourselves emotionally. The fact that as men we die prematurely is just the final chapter in a lifelong story of self-destructiveness.

A behaviour pattern of one-sided lives centered around compulsive overwork is what wears us men out long before our time. It's a slow form of suicide, however we try to rationalize it. I wonder what lemmings might say, if we could interview them on their way into the sea? Say we had the CBC there with a microphone. What would they say? I imagine it might go something like this:

"Excuse me, but why are you running into the sea?"
"You just can't buck the system."
"I'm the manager, I've got to set an example."
"I'm doing it for my wife and kids."
"Sorry I haven't got time to think about that, I've got a deadline to meet."
"Don't pick on me - I'm no different from anyone else."
"I have to keep up with my competition."

As men we have a whole slew of apparently rational, hard-nosed reasons why we have to work ourselves into early graves. But what's the real reason?

B. The Hero Myth

I would suggest to you that underneath all our apparent rationality, the problem we face as men is that in our deepest hearts we are incurable romantics. And the romantic fantasy that most entrances us is the myth of the hero.

The basis elements of the hero mythology are as follows:

1) Heroes can't die if they are pure of heart.
2) Heroes have to be tough and fearless to succeed.
3) The hero who ignores his limits will have no limits.
4) Heroes must struggle and suffer for a long time without

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Bruce O'Hara
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG021388

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

recognition or reward.

5) When he finally finds the holy grail, the hero will be loved and revered by all.

The hero myth is a wonderful inspiring, uplifting fantasy. The only problem is that we men forget that it's only a story. Which is not surprising given that whether we're in the board room, the locker room, the lunch room, or the TV room, we're surrounded by the kind of wishful thinking that makes up the hero myth. John Wayne, Audie Murphy, James Bond, Rocky, Rambo - it's all the same story - just dressed up in different clothes. Whether the model is the macho hero, the liberal hero, the baddest bad-ass hero, the hard-nosed businessman hero or the sensitive hero - its all just variations on the same theme.

It's such a seductive fantasy: if we're on the side of the good, no harm can come to us. The person who acts like he has no limits, has not limits. Life may be hell right now, but once you finally rescue the fairy princess you'll be given half the kingdom. No wonder Sylvester Stallone can make the same move 4 times and make $100 million a pop. I'm sure Rocky #5 will be rolling off the production lines any day now. Hollywood knows how addicted we are to our fantasies.

Perhaps it will give a little clearer idea of the extent of our male wishful thinking if we look at the differences in how we treat our automobiles and how we treat our bodies.

Let's imagine you own a little English sports car, a red MG, with a tachometer that redlines about 6000 rpm. How would you treat that automobile? I would take a guess and say that most of us would drive that car with the engine speed mostly in the 2000 to 4000 rpm. range, because we know that gives the smoothest ride, the best gas mileage and creates the least wear and tear on the engine. We'd take her up to 5500 rpm. to pass or accelerate, but wouldn't run it in that range for an extended period of time.

On rare occasions we may take the engine right up to or even over the red line for a minute, just to see what the car can do - but watching the tachometer very closely and listening carefully to the engine. We'd change the oil regularly and consider it false economy to scrimp on preventative maintenance.

Now, how do we drive this little biological sports car we have? Most of us drive it regularly at 5500 rpm. - operating on the magical belief that will be more efficient, and make us stronger. We regularly take it well over the red line closing our eyes in the magical belief that if we don't see the red line it won't exist. We skip preventative maintenance activities like sleep and vacations under the illusion that because we're being noble and hard working no harm will come to us. And you wonder why your MG ages more gracefully than you do!

C. The Virtue of Toughness

There's one part of the hero myth that deserves particular attention, and that's the idea that heroes are supposed to be tough. Heroes are supposed to ignore fatigue, grit their teeth against the pain, steel themselves against cowardice, rise above despair and doubt. Real men are supposed to suppress negative emotions through sheer force of will. The "willpower" approach is probably workable for Superman but mere mortals like you and I rely on more

mundane techniques.

The most basic way that we suppress feelings is what is known as the startle response. "President John F. Kennedy has just been shot" - can you remember how your breath caught in your throat when you first heard the announcement. Central to the startle reaction is a sharp constriction of the chest muscles which numbs feeling and thereby dampens panic.

As men, over the course of years of believing we're not supposed to have most of the feelings we do have, almost all of us develop a chronic tightness in the chest - a kind of permanent startle reaction.

Exercise is problematic because as soon as we start to breath heavily the chest opens up, and we start to feel all the things we've been trying not to feel - so often we find ourselves avoiding exercise without really knowing why.

There are other ways of suppressing "unmasculine" feelings. Whenever we eat something, our bodies release small amounts of endorphins - natural morphine-like substances which tranquilize us, and thereby aid digestion. And if food won't block our unheroic emotions, there's always chemicals. Novocaine is very effective at blocking feelings, but it's not habit-forming, except among dentists. Alcohol works very effectively to depress the central nervous system. The nicotine in cigarettes and caffeine in coffer both create a buzz in the nervous system which tends to obscure other feelings.

We tend to think of food, alcohol and cigarettes as addictions in themselves. I think it's important to recognize that what we're really addicted to is the suppression of feeling. What's scary about this wholesale suppression of feeling is how unconscious and automatic it is, and how deeply rooted.

This learned pattern of suppressing feelings does have some useful advantages in particular situations. Bursting into tears at a board meeting, for instance, is not likely to win you a promotion. It enables us to complete some awful but necessary tasks - like working in a slaughterhouse, for example. In emergency situations it prevents us from succumbing to panic. And finally, it enables us to temporarily push ourselves beyond what we normally could do.

The problem is that this pattern of suppressing our feelings, which has real advantages if used consciously in specific circumstances, has immense disadvantages if we do it automatically all the time. As a way of life it has some fatal drawbacks.

- Loss of inner wisdom: Feeling and intuition add greatly to our power to make good decisions. Our emotions will often alert us to potential problems long before our rational abilities. When feelings are habitually cut off, this wisdom is lost.
- Loss of connectedness: People bond on a feeling level. Whether the relationship is parent-child, husband-wife, or friend-friend, if the feeling channel isn't open there's no life to the relationship.
- Loss of self-protection warnings: Human bodies are designed with wonderfully intricate feedback mechanisms that tell us how to care for our bodies, what their needs are, and what their limits are. As men we make it a virtue to ignore all this crucial information - and then wonder why we age so quickly.
- The mechanisms we use to suppress feeling cause us damage: The medical dangers of alcohol, nicotine, and over-eating are well known. A

constricted chest constricts the heart and puts it under extra strain. It also constricts breathing and leaves the body chronically short of air. Cells that chronically don't get enough oxygen are more at risk of becoming cancerous.

• Positive feelings are suppressed too: The said truth is that the mechanisms that suppress feeling are non-selective: We lose the good feelings as well as the bad. When we try to suppress negative or "unmasculine" feelings, when we try to be tough, we end up dead from the neck down. That's the real tragedy of men's lives - that so often we lose our life, our heart, many years before we die.

We start life living in full vibrant colour, and our culture trains us little by little to tune the colour out. So often we end up living in black and white, and grow to believe that's all there is.

D. Ten Ways to Save Your Own Life

It's become very clear to me that it's not easy as a man to stay alive in our culture. That it requires a conscious effort to continually break free of the male straight jacket. Over the years I've been taught a number of ideas and tools that have proven helpful to me in keeping the life in my life. I'd like to share them with you.

1) If you live with lemmings, don't follow the crowd: Our culture socializes men to kill themselves emotionally so they can kill themselves physically. A lot of our cultural role models, and much of the advice we get from the media, friends, and co-workers will lead us to do violence against our real, human selves in pursuit of an unreal idealized fantasy. An excellent guide to how to stop hurting yourself is Compassion and Self-Hate by Theodore Rubin.

2) Let go of being a hero: The hero delusion is fools' gold - all glitter and no substance. It's a siren song that leads us to be dead heroes. It's important to recognize for ourselves both how we try to be heroes and what we hope our heroic rewards will be. In order to enjoy the real pleasures of being ourselves, we must let go of our romantic fantasies. A thought-provoking book on the male myth is He by Robert Johnson.

3) Get Physical: One way to bring feeling back into our bodies is through body-centered activities. Regular exercise, stretching, yoga, tai chi, and outdoor activities all can help bring attention back to the body. If all else fails, breathe.

4) Work less: For more than 99% of human history mankind lived in nomadic tribes of hunters and gatherers. Anthropologists estimate that the average amount of time that such people spent on activities we would call work was 20 to 25 hours per week. In Europe as recently as the middle Ages there were 200 religious holidays a year on which much of the population did not work. The human body is not designed to work 50 or 60 hours per week. Most men can arrange to work less - if they ask in the appropriate manner. Work Well's Guidebook Put Work in Its Place (available through Work Well) should be of assistance in this regard. Self-employed people who are overloaded should consider taking in a partner - it may be helpful to your business. I have cut my work hours back 40% in the past year, but the quantity of work I get done has fallen by less than 20% and the quality of my work is higher than it's ever been. We do our best work when we're fresh.

5) Life More With Less: Our possessions possess us. How many

of us own fancy cars or luxurious houses, only to spend so much time working to pay for them that we're too tired to enjoy them? A book titled Living More With Less by Dorothy Longacre is an excellent resource on how to simplify our lives.

6) Seek Balance: Men tend to put all their eggs in one basket. A man who puts his whole life into his job is an excellent candidate for a heart attack or suicide if he loses his job - or retires. If you have several areas of meaning and satisfaction in your life - work, family, friends, hobbies, and volunteering - your sense of self-esteem is built on a much broader base.

7) Create Safe Spaces: A lot of the world will not support you in being a feeling human being. Seek out friends you can be yourself with. I belong to a men's support group and find both strength and comfort in it. Herb Goldberg's book The New Male is a safe space you can keep on your bookshelf. A daily journal of thoughts and feelings is a private zone of safety.

8) Track Your Blocking: I find that some of my feelings are blocked so quickly that the only way I can get in touch with them is by the tracks they leave. Whenever I find myself smoking, drinking or eating too much, I begin to monitor myself. What was the thought I had just before I decided I needed a drink? By this means I can sometimes turn and face the feelings I would otherwise automatically run from.

9) Nurture Others - and Yourself: One of the reasons women are better at taking care of themselves is that they get more practice in nurturing. When you practice giving to others, and showing compassion for them, it's not too hard to extend that treatment to yourself. It's also important to recognize that gender roles have changed. It used to be that men produced and women nurtured. Women are now producers and nurturers, which takes part of the load off us men as breadwinners, but requires that we improve our taking-care-of skills if we are to keep the gender seesaw in balance.

10) Value Resilience Over Toughness: When something's tough, it's strong but brittle. Push it past it's limits and it shatters. Resilience, on the other hand, gives when its limits are exceeded, but immediately bounces back - which means it usually gets its way in the end. To put it concretely, look at the differences between an egg and a tennis ball. If you try to push in the surface of both you'll find the egg holds it's ground - (it's tough), while the tennis ball gives way and comes back (it's resilient). Life tends to knock human beings around a certain amount. Which will fare better - toughness, or resilience? A simple bounce test should suffice to demonstrate. If you admire Humpty Dumpty, model yourself after the egg. But if you'd like to keep your bounce as the years go by - better be on the ball - and know your limits.